

Talk about Fiction

François Recanati
CREA, CNRS/Ecole polytechnique
1 rue Descartes, 75005 Paris, France
recanati@poly.polytechnique.fr

1. Consider the following sentences:

- (1) Santa Claus can't come until we're all asleep
- (2) We must go to bed now because Santa Claus can't come until we're all asleep
- (3) My children believe that Santa Claus can't come until we're all asleep

Let us suppose that Mary says (1) to her children. The analysis of (1) is easy and obvious: Mary does not really refer to Santa Claus, as Santa Claus does not exist; but she pretends that he exists and refers to him (or should we say: quasi-refers) 'within the pretense'. The same analysis obviously applies to (2). Again, Mary pretends that Santa Claus exists, and her entire utterance is to be interpreted within that pretense.

The same analysis also applies to (3), appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Since Santa Claus does not exist, Mary cannot really assert that her children believe *him* to have such and such properties: she cannot ascribe her children a singular belief concerning Santa Claus, for that would commit her to the existence of Santa Claus. But what Mary can do, and what she does, is engage into pretense: she temporarily pretends that Santa Claus exists, and within that pretense ascribes her children the belief that *he* can't come until they are all asleep.

This analysis of statements like (3) was first put forward by John McDowell twenty years ago, in the following passage:

Suppose an interpreter finds an expression — say, «Mumbo-Jumbo» — which functions, syntactically, like other expressions which he can construe as names, but for which he can find no bearer, and reasonably believes there is no bearer. (...) A sincere assertive utterance of a sentence containing a name with a bearer can be understood as expressing a belief correctly describable as a belief, concerning the bearer, that it satisfies some specified condition. If the name has no bearer (in the interpreter's view), he cannot describe any suitably related belief in that transparent

style. (...) In practice, an interpreter might say things like «This man is saying that Mumbo-Jumbo brings thunder», and might explain an utterance which he described that way as expressing the belief that Mumbo-Jumbo brings thunder. That is no real objection. *Such an interpreter is simply playing along with his deluded subject — putting things his way.* (McDowell 1977: 124-127; emphasis mine)

According to McDowell, the interpreter's assertion, to the effect that the subject says/believes that Mumbo-Jumbo brings thunder, is a pretend assertion. Such an assertion presupposes, and can be made seriously only if the speaker believes, that Mumbo-Jumbo exists. If the interpreter takes the name 'Mumbo Jumbo' to have no bearer, he must either refrain from reporting the belief in the same style in which it is expressed (that is, using a simple subject-predicate sentence: 'Mumbo-Jumbo brings thunder'), or, 'playing along with his deluded subject', he must temporarily pretend that Mumbo Jumbo exists.

By treating the use of the singular term in (3) as an instance of pretense, one can maintain that it is a genuine singular term, whose only semantic contribution is its bearer. Since there is no bearer, no proposition is expressed. Now that consequence may seem hard to swallow. When I say that my son believes Santa Claus will come tonight, it seems that I say something *true*: my son actually believes that. But on the McDowell type of analysis, the utterance is true only 'in the pretense'; outside the pretense, it is neither true nor false, as it contains a singular term which does not refer. That consequence of the account certainly clashes with our intuitions.

2. Two authors have pursued and elaborated the McDowell type of analysis in recent times: Evans (1982) and Walton (1990). (See also Crimmins, forthcoming). In response to the above objection, they claim that 'pretense can be exploited for serious purposes' (Evans 1982: 364). As Walton says,

It is not uncommon for one to pretend to say one thing by way of actually saying something else. A diner jokingly remarks that he could eat a rhinoceros, in order to indicate, seriously, that he is hungry. Smith declares in a sarcastic tone of voice, «Jones is a superhero», thereby implying or suggesting or asserting that Jones thinks thus of himself. (Walton 1990: 394)

In particular, Evans and Walton insist that we can make a serious claim *about* a fiction by making a pretend assertion *within* the fiction: the utterance counts as true of the fiction if and only if it is pretend-true in the fiction (Evans 1982: 363-364; Walton 1990: 399). Thus I can say

- (4) Santa Claus has a white beard and red clothes
- (5) Sherlock Holmes is clever and Watson is modest

and thereby convey something true concerning the respective stories. The mechanism at work here, Walton says, is fairly general. One can indicate that a certain behaviour is appropriate by actually engaging in that behaviour.¹ Now, the appropriate use to make of a fiction consists in pretending-to-believe propositions true in the fiction. By expressing such a pretend-belief, as in (4) and (5), one indirectly conveys that it is appropriate to so pretend, hence that (4) and (5) are true in the fiction.

On this analysis there are many utterances which, literally, are only pretend assertions, but which nevertheless serve indirectly to make genuine assertions — assertions that are true or false *simpliciter*. That goes a long way toward explaining why we have the feeling that 'My son believes that Santa Claus will come tonight', or 'In the Conan Doyle stories, Holmes smokes opium from time to times' are really true rather than merely pretend-true. The speaker offers a true characterisation of the Holmes story, or of her children's belief, by uttering something which is not literally true, and does not even express a proposition.

This analysis raises a serious difficulty, however. We can perhaps admit that, by uttering (5), one makes a true assertion about the story indirectly, by making a pretend-assertion true within the story. But when we make it *explicit* that we are talking about the story, as in

- (6) *In the Conan Doyle stories* Holmes is clever and Watson is modest

are we still characterizing the story indirectly? In what sense is the genuine assertion made only via a pretend assertion? There no longer is intuitive support for the claim that the genuine assertion about the story is an indirect speech act, in such cases. And the same thing holds for

- (3) *My children believe that* Santa Claus can't come until

¹ «One can indicate to others what behaviour is appropriate in a given situation simply by behaving in the appropriate way. A native of an exotic culture might inform his alien guests that the snake livers are to be eaten with the parrot's nest sauce by going ahead and doing so. If it is awkward or improper to discuss Harold's winning of a prize before it is officially announced, one way of indicating that the announcement has been made, that the subject of Harold's good fortune is now a properly discussable one, would be to begin discussing it. Doing something is sometimes a way of claiming that it is proper or acceptable to do it.» (Walton 1990: 399)

we're all asleep

Not only is this a genuine assertion concerning my children's belief; it appears to be also a literal one — much more literal, at any rate, than 'I could eat a rhinoceros' or 'Jones is a super-hero'.

There is a second, more theoretical problem. If we hold that metafictional sentences like (3), (3) and (6) literally make only pretend assertions, we must say which pretend assertion it is which they make. Such sentences consist of a *prefix* ('In the Conan Doyle stories', 'My children believe that') and a *fictional sentence* ('Holmes is clever and Watson is modest', 'Santa Claus can't come until we're all asleep'). The fictional sentence expresses only a pretend-truth, i.e. something that would count as true if uttered in the context of the fiction but may well be neither true nor false in reality. (It is neither true nor false when an empty name occurs in it.) Assuming that the metafictional sentence itself expresses a pretend-truth, could it be the same pretend-truth as that expressed by the fictional sentence? Hardly. (6) explicitly mentions the Conan Doyle stories, that is, the fiction itself. Now the fiction does not exist in the fiction: hence it cannot be true in the fiction that in the fiction Holmes is clever. What is true in the fiction is that Holmes is clever, period. But if what the metafictional sentence expresses is not true in the fiction, in what sense is it a pretend-truth? Is it not, rather, a real truth concerning the fiction *qua* real world object? Drawing that conclusion would at least enable us to account for our intuitions that such examples are ordinary assertions, rather than non-literal assertions on a par with e.g. ironical utterances.

It is interesting to consider what Walton has to say about examples such as (6). It is, he says, the utterance of the fictional sentence which is a piece of pretense. That piece of pretense is demonstrated and presented as an appropriate move (one that 'makes it fictional that one is speaking truly') in a game of make believe licensed by the Conan Doyle stories. The compound itself is not seen as an instance of pretense;² the compound is, or at least contains, a genuine metalinguistic statement concerning (the appropriateness of) an act of pretense, which act of pretense is exemplified only by a constituent of the compound (the embedded sentence).

That analysis is quite incompatible with the McDowell line Walton seems to be defending. If we want to stick to that line, we must insist that *the metafictional sentence*

² «The appended phrase [= the prefix] is not itself uttered in pretense, it seems, nor does it contribute to specifying a kind of pretense. It serves merely to comment on the kind of pretense specified by the words to which it is attached» (Walton 1990: 422). That is not Walton's last word, however. See below his remarks on the 'secondary pretense' underlying the prefix.

itself literally expresses only a pretend-truth. If we say that, however, we must say which pretend-truth it is that the metafictional sentence expresses. We are thus back to the problem I raised above: if the metafictional sentence literally expresses a pretend-truth, that can't be the same as the pretend-truth expressed by the fictional sentence, insofar as the latter expresses something which is true 'in the fiction'.

3. The pretense licensed by the fiction — that which a normal consumer of the Conan Doyle stories engages in — is not the only one that can be appealed to in connection with examples like (6). There is, according to Walton (1990: 422ff, 429), a secondary pretense at play here, which we may call the 'Meinongian pretense'. The content of the Meinongian pretense is this: we pretend that the world contains not only real objects and situations, but also, located in some extra dimension, imaginary objects and situations. On this view, although Holmes is an imaginary person who does not really exist, still *there is* such a person, in the imaginary realm. Since there is such a person, we can refer to him. It is therefore a feature common to the primary pretense (that which is internal to the Holmes story) and to the secondary, Meinongian pretense (which takes the Holmes story to describe an outlandish portion of the universe), that Holmes 'has being' and can be referred to.

To account for utterances like (5), we can appeal to either form of pretense; but to account for utterances like (6), we can only appeal to the secondary pretense. We can't appeal to the primary pretense because, as we have seen, it is not true in the fiction that in the fiction Holmes is clever. But we can appeal to the secondary, Meinongian pretense: The speaker who says 'In the Conan Doyle stories, Holmes is clever' pretends that the universe contains not only Conan Doyle and the fiction authored by him, but also ('in' the fiction in question) an imaginary individual, Holmes, who does not exist 'outside' that fiction. Existence — or should we say: real existence — is treated as a property which some objects have and others don't have. As Walton remarks,

What we pretend to be the case — that there are things that have a property expressed by the predicate «is a merely fictional character», for instance, and that «exists» expresses a property some things lack — is just what some theorists of a realist persuasion claim actually to be the case. Their mistake is one of excessive literal-mindedness, one of mistaking pretense for what is pretended. (Walton 1990: 424).

On this analysis an explicitly metafictional utterance is not literally true or false; it expresses a truth only in if we indulge in the Meinongian pretense. Why, then, does it not sound 'non-literal' or at least special, as e.g. ironical utterances do? The main reason is that the Meinongian pretense corresponds to a deeply entrenched way of thinking,

comparable to, for instance, our construal of time as a moving object. That metaphor informs a lot of our thought and talk about time, as when we talk of the weeks 'ahead of us' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 41-43). Since that is the way, or one of the ways, we *normally* think about time, we don't even notice it. Similarly, the Meinongian pretense so permeates our thinking of the imaginary that we don't notice its various manifestations.

The Meinongian pretense arguably corresponds to a particular stage in cognitive development. According to Perner (1991), the child is able to think and talk about the imaginary, much before he or she masters the full-fledged notion of a 'representation'. The child first acquires the capacity of entertaining simultaneously several 'models' of the world. This capacity is manifested in the child's mastery of temporal concepts (which requires representing the past and the future as well as the present) and of counterfactual thinking (as exemplified in pretend play, which requires thinking simultaneously of the actual and the imaginary). Appropriately using several models, e.g. a model of the past and a model of the present, is not sufficient, Perner argues: the child must integrate them within a single, complex model, so as to be able to represent the *relations* between the past and the present (as when the child says that an object which has disappeared from view 'is gone'), or between the real and the imaginary (as when the child says that her mother is 'only pretending') (Perner 1991: 65-66). Now this notion of a single, complex model encompassing both the real and the imaginary while keeping track of their distinction closely corresponds to the Meinongian pretense. The domain of objects is divided between those that are real and those that are not. Further properties of the objects follow from their classification as real or imaginary. All the objects in question are part of the domain: they all have being, and are simply distinguished by their properties (including the property of being 'real' or 'imaginary'). Commenting on an experimental set up in which children are asked to compare the situation in a picture with a real situation (both of them containing Snoopy), Perner writes:

Depending on how much the child knows about «pictorial situations», the child may be aware that in the picture Snoopy does not move, cannot be stroked very rewardingly, does not snap, and so on. This awareness, however, does not show that the child is also aware of the relationship between the picture and the real scene. Snoopy is there twice, once in reality and again in the picture. (Perner 1991: 85).

The child masters the elaborate notion of representation only at a later stage, when she is able to conceive of both mis-representation and the availability of several interpretations for a given representation.

4. Let us take stock. I said that metafictional utterances such as (3) or (6) — repeated below — are (literally) true or false only under the Meinongian pretense; outside the pretense, they are (literally) neither true nor false.

(3) My children believe that Santa Claus can't come until we're all asleep

(6) In the Conan Doyle stories Holmes is clever and Watson is modest

Now intuitively such utterances seem to be true or false *simpliciter*. To account for that intuition, I said that

the Meinongian pretense corresponds to a deeply entrenched way of thinking, comparable to, for instance, our construal of time as a moving object. That metaphor informs a lot of our thought and talk about time, as when we talk of the weeks 'ahead of us'. Since that is the way, or one of the ways, we *normally* think about time, we don't even notice it. Similarly, the Meinongian pretense so permeates our thinking of the imaginary that we don't notice its various manifestations.

On this view the literal/non-literal distinction still applies, even though the non-literal meaning of the utterance is what we normally grasp. There is a layer of literal meaning, which we hardly notice, and a further layer of meaning which corresponds to what we normally mean (or understand) when we utter (or interpret) the sentence.

There is a more radical view, however. According to Lakoff and Johnson, «our ordinary conceptual system... is fundamentally metaphorical in nature» (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3), and there often is no non-metaphorical way of saying or thinking something. That does not prevent our utterances/thoughts from being evaluable as true or false. It follows that we must reject the view that «metaphors cannot directly state truths, and [that], if they can state truths at all, it is only indirectly, via some non-metaphorical "literal" paraphrase» (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 159). They go further and talk as if they rejected the literal/non-literal distinction itself. Thus they claim that when we metaphorically talk of argument in terms of war, we talk literally, since it is our very concepts that are metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5). And Lakoff explicitly repudiates the view that, in metaphor, we «say one thing (with a literal meaning) and mean something else (with a different, but nonetheless literal, meaning)» (Lakoff 1993: 248).

Yet we must be more careful and distinguish three issues. First, there is the question, whether we can always find a literal paraphrase for a metaphor; second, there is the question, whether we can maintain the contrast between the literal and the metaphorical; finally, there is a third question concerning the role of the metaphorical component of meaning in our assessments of truth and falsity. Only the second and

third questions matter for our purposes. Now, with respect to these questions, I think the more radical view defended by Lakoff can and must be resisted.

According to Len Talmy, one of the contemporary advocates of 'fictivity theory' in cognitive science, metaphor is cognitive pretense, and there is no pretense, in the relevant sense, without some realization that the pretense in question is *merely* pretense, that is, without a constrasting, non-fictive (i.e. literal) representation in the background. As he says,

the very characteristic that renders an expression metaphoric - what metaphoricity depends on — is that speakers or hearers have somewhere within their cognition a belief about the target domain contrary to their cognitive representation of what is being stated about it, and have somewhere in their cognition an understanding of the discrepancy between these two representations (Talmy 1996: 269).

Lakoff and Johnson themselves admit that «arguments and wars are different kinds of things» (1980: 5), even though they hold that our metaphorical construal of argument in terms of war is the normal way for us to think and talk about it. This confirms Talmy's observation that

any of the Lakoff and Johnson's three-term formulas — for example, «Love is a journey», «Argument is war», «Seeing is touching» — is actually a cover term for a pair of complementary formulas, one of them factive and the other fictive, as represented in

Fictive: X is Y

Factive: X is not Y

Thus, factively, love is *not* a journey, while in some fictive expressions, love *is* a journey. (Talmy 1996: 269)

We are therefore entitled to draw a distinction between the 'factive' truth-conditions of a metaphorical utterance and its 'fictive' truth-conditions. When we talk of the weeks 'ahead of us', it may be that the form of words we use implies that time is a moving object, as Lakoff and Johnson put it; still, the expression 'weeks ahead of us' can easily be ascribed a definite extension, and the sentence a definite truth-value, quite independent of the metaphor in terms of which we think of the weeks in question. In such cases the metaphor is confined to the 'mode of presentation' level and does not affect the evaluation of the utterance as true or false. Or consider Talmy's own example

- (7) That mountain range lies between Canada and Mexico
- (8) Than mountain range goes from Canada to Mexico

The second form of word posits a 'fictive motion' which is absent from the first example: we talk as if the mountain range moved, by using the verb 'go'. Still there is a sense in which (7) and (8) *say the same thing*, and are true in the same conditions. Let us say that (7) and (8) have the same factive truth-conditions, even though (8) has a superimposed layer of *fictive* truth-conditions which determines our cognitive construal of the state of affairs it depicts.

Even though the pretense is confined to the mode of presentation level, it must be acknowledged because it is closely tied to, and explains, the particular form of words which we use (e.g. the verb 'go' in (8)). As Talmy says, the fictivity pattern is typically exhibited when

one of the discrepant representations is the belief held by the speaker or hearer about the real nature of the referent of a sentence, and the other representation is the literal reference of the linguistic forms that make up the sentence. Here the literal representation is assessed as less veridical than the representation based on belief. Accordingly, the literal representation is fictive, while the representation based on belief is factive (Talmy 1996: 213).

In general, pretense theory is helpful when there is a mismatch between the truth-conditions which (in virtue of its form) a sentence should have, and the (factive) truth-conditions which it actually has.³ Whenever we postulate semantic pretense, therefore, we must identify two sets of truth-conditions for the utterance: its fictive truth-conditions and its factive truth-conditions. Accordingly, we must enquire into what the factive truth-conditions of metafictional statements are.

5. The first answer that comes to mind is this. A metafictional statement like (6) is (factively) true just in case, in the relevant story, there is a person named 'Holmes', with such and such properties, who is clever, and a person named 'Watson', with such and such properties, who is modest. If that is right, the content of the embedded sentence in a metafictional utterance turns out to be general rather than singular, at the factive

³ «The point of postulating semantic pretense... is to answer the question, what is a sentence like that doing in a statement like this? We have a fairly strong opinion about the sort of claim that is made in the statement, and a fairly strong opinion about the sort of claim that the sentence, in virtue of its structure, is really suited to expressing, but these opinions clash: the sentence doesn't seem suited to expressing the sort of claim it actually is used to express.» (Crimmins forthcoming)

level.⁴ Still, this analysis is compatible with the view that fictional names are genuine names even in metafictional utterances. For, at the fictive level, the name refers and is used to express a singular proposition.

Yet I do not think that answer is quite right. The factive content of (3) is not adequately captured by any of the following statements:

- (9) My children believe that there is an old, bearded man called 'Santa Claus', who wears a red dress, lives in the sky, etc. and cannot come until we're all asleep
- (10) My children believe that the old, bearded man called 'Santa Claus', who wears a red dress, lives in the sky, etc. can't come until we're all asleep

These statements ascribe to my children a *general* belief, while the belief which is ascribed to them in (3) is, or at least purports to be, *singular*. As we shall see, it is the nature of the belief we want to ascribe which explains why, in (3), we have recourse to pretense in ascribing it.

The distinction between singular and general beliefs is reasonably clear. The singular belief that Clinton is F is distinct from the general belief that someone with such and such properties (Clinton-properties) is F. To be sure, a singular belief pragmatically implies a corresponding general belief. To have a singular belief about a given individual one must have a singular or *de re* concept, that is, a 'dossier' containing various pieces of information putatively concerning that individual. Now one cannot have such a dossier without believing that *there is* an individual x satisfying the material in the dossier. Still, the singular belief that t is F (where 't' is the mental singular term associated with the dossier) and the general belief that the G is F (where 'G' is a conjunction of all the predicates in the dossier) are clearly distinct: one is general, the other is singular. According to standard wisdom, they do not have the same possible-worlds truth-conditions. (And, I would argue, that is so even if we 'rigidify' the description.)

Now consider the case in which the believer is mistaken and there is no object the dossier is about. For example the believer has heard of a promising young philosopher called 'John Martins', and has accumulated information concerning him; but it turns out that there is no such person — no one at the source of the informational chain which reached the believer. As Donnellan says, the informational chain 'ends in a block' (Donnellan 1974). The believer can no longer be said to believe the singular proposition that Martins is F, for there is no such proposition. But he still can be said to

⁴ That view has been argued for by many authors, including Plantinga (1974: 159), Currie (1990: 146ff) and Cresswell (1990, Chapter 9).

believe the associated general proposition, to the effect that there is an individual with such and such properties (the Martins-properties), who is F.

In such a complex situation the subject entertains what I call a *pseudo-singular belief*. She has a singular mental sentence tokened in her belief box, but no singular proposition is thereby believed, because the sentence in question fails to express any proposition. How can we ascribe such a pseudo-singular belief to the believer? We cannot express the singular proposition she takes herself to believe, for there is no such proposition. If we express the associated general proposition and ascribe *it* to the believer, what we ascribe is not the pseudo-singular belief; for a pseudo-singular belief is no more a general belief than a singular belief is.

In such a case, there are only two options for the ascriber. He can describe the situation from the outside, as it were; that is, he can describe the believer as taking herself to believe a singular proposition (that is, as having a singular sentence tokened in her belief box), while in fact there is no such proposition (the singular sentence fails to determine a content). Or he can exploit the Meinongian pretense and do as if there was such an object as Martins, Holmes or Santa Claus; that is, he can fictively ascribe to the believer a singular belief concerning Martins, Holmes, or Santa Claus. Since it is clear that the pretense is a pretense and that, in fact, there is no such individual, the fictive ascription of a singular belief concerning that individual amounts to the fictive ascription of a pseudo-singular belief — an ascription which (in contrast to the ascription of both singular and general beliefs) is not directly expressible save by appealing to the pretense.

References

- Cresswell, M. (1990), *Entities and Indices*, Dordrecht, Kluwer.
- Crimmins, M. (forthcoming), *Hesperus and Phosphorus*.
- Currie, G. (1990), *The Nature of Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, G. (1982), *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. by J. McDowell, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Donnellan, K. (1974), *Speaking of Nothing*, in «Philosophical Review» 83, pp. 3-31.
- Lakoff, G. (1993), *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*, in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 202-251.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- McDowell, J. (1977), *On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name*, in A. W. Moore (ed.), *Meaning and Reference*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 111-136.
- Perner, J. (1991), *Understanding the Representational Mind*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.
- Plantinga, A. (1974), *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Talmy, L. (1996), *Fictive Motion in Language and "Ception"*, in R. Bloom et al. (eds), *Language and Space*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, pp. 211-276.
- Walton, K. (1990), *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.